SŪRAH 76

Al-Insān

(Man)

Prologue

Some reports suggest that this *sūrah* was revealed in Madīnah, but it is a Makkan revelation. Its Makkan character is indeed very obvious considering its subject matter, its flow and other characteristics. Hence, we give more credence to those reports stating its revelation in Makkah. In fact, there are indications in the way it runs suggesting that it was among the earlier *sūrahs* to be revealed in Makkah. We may cite for example the detailed images of happiness and torment in the life to come, the directive given to the Prophet to remain patient, awaiting his Lord's judgement, and not to obey any sinner or unbeliever from among them. These are the things Makkan revelations always emphasized, particularly when the persecution of the advocates of the Islamic message was becoming fierce. Moreover, the Prophet is encouraged to hold firmly to the truth he has been given, allowing the unbelievers respite but not to incline to or listen to them. Such directives are found in *Sūrahs* 68, 73 and 74 in this volume. These directives are similar to the ones found in this *sūrah*. Therefore, the possibility that it was revealed in Madīnah is remote and better discounted.

In totality, the *sūrah* is a calm address encouraging people to turn to God, obey Him, seek His pleasure, remember His favours, work to avoid His punishment, maintain alertness to the test He puts His servants to

and understand His wisdom in creation, bestowing favours, testing and giving the unbelievers respite.

The *sūrah* begins with an inspiring touch, asking the question: where was man before coming into this life? Who gave him his existence? Who gave him the position he occupies in this life after he had none: "*Was there not a period of time when man was not yet something to be thought of?*" (Verse 1) This is followed by a second touch speaking about man's origins and God's wisdom manifested in his creation and His giving him his energies and faculties: "*We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him. Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight.*" (Verse 2) The third touch speaks of guiding man to the right way, giving him help to go along this way before leaving him to choose the way he wants to go and the fate he wants to end up with: "*We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful.*" (Verse 3) These three touches set the human heart thinking deeply, glancing back and casting a look forward, and then reflecting before choosing which way to go. Then the *sūrah* gives clear advice to man as he stands at the crossroads, warning him against taking the way leading to hell and encouraging him in every way to take the way to heaven, pointing to the great variety of pleasure that awaits him there: "*For the unbelievers, we have prepared chains and shackles, and a blazing fire. The righteous shall drink from a cup mixed with* kāfūr, *a fountain where God's servants shall drink, making it flow in abundance.*" (Verses 4–6)

Before completing its description of what believers will enjoy, the *sūrah* now draws a sketch showing the features of those righteous people. In so doing, it uses some fine words and expressions that are in perfect harmony with the splendid bliss these people enjoy in heaven: "*They are the ones who fulfil their vows and stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide, who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive, [saying within themselves,] 'We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.*" (Verses 7–10)

The *sūrah* then presents the reward which will be given to these people who willingly attend to difficult duties, who fear the bleak, grim day, the generous who feed others despite themselves being in need, and who only seek God's pleasure, hoping for no reward from anyone else. As the

sūrah presents this, we find that it is a reward of security, happiness and perfect enjoyment: "*God will save them from the woes of that day, and will grant them radiance and joy, and will reward them for their patience in adversity with a garden and [garments of] silk. They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold. Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach. They will be served with silver plates and goblets that seem to be crystal, crystal-clear, but made of silver, the measure of which they are the ones to determine. They will be given to drink of a cup flavoured with ginger, from a spring there called* Salsabīl. *They will be waited upon by immortal youths. If you see them, you would think they were scattered pearls. If you were to look around, you would see only bliss and a vast kingdom. They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and brocade; and adorned with bracelets of silver. And their Lord will give them a most pure drink. This is a reward for you. Your endeavours are well appreciated.* (Verses 11–22)

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet encouraging him to stand firm in the face of those who turn away, persist in disbelief and deny the truth. He is directed to remain patient in the face of all this adversity and to await God's judgement. He should maintain his tie with his Lord, deriving strength from Him whenever he feels that the road he has to travel is too long: "*It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation. Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers. Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night.*" (Verses 23–26)

In conclusion, the *sūrah* reminds the unbelievers of the heavy day that they do not reckon with. This is the day feared by the righteous who are keen to guard against its punishment. It tells them that they represent no serious issue to God who gave them all the power they have and is able to replace them with others. He bestows His favours on them in fulfilment of His wish to put people to the test. The *sūrah* ends with a brief mention of the results of this test: "*These people love the fleeting life, and leave behind them a day that will be heavy. It is We who have created them and strengthened their constitution. If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind. This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord. Yet you cannot will*

except by the will of God. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He admits to His grace whoever He will, but for the wrongdoers He has prepared grievous suffering." (Verses 27–31)

The *sūrah* begins with a reminder of how man comes into existence and God's design in so originating him to undergo a test, and it concludes with the outcome of this test, as determined by God at the point of origination. Thus, the beginning and the end point to the deliberate and elaborate planning of life. Man performs very badly if he remains heedless, unaware of the purpose of his life when he is being put to a test, and has been equipped with the faculties that help him pass this test.

Between the opening and close, the *sūrah* gives the longest, or perhaps one of the longest if we take *Sūrah* 56 into account, description of the blessings granted to the people of heaven. These are mostly material, but they are coupled with God's acceptance and the honour He grants. The fact that this description is so detailed points to its being a Makkan revelation, because the addressees were newcomers to Islam, having lived in *jāhiliyyah*, or ignorance. They were fond of material luxuries. They would be very impressed with its prospect. There will always be people who store much by such luxuries. God knows His creation best, and knows what suits them and what has a deep effect on their hearts and minds. There is definitely a higher and more refined type of happiness and joy, such as the one mentioned in the preceding *sūrah*, The Resurrection: "*Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord.*" (75: 22–23)

Al-Insān (Man)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Was there not a period of time when man was not yet something to be thought of? (1)

هَلْ أَتَىٰ عَلَى الْإِنسَانِ حِينٌ مِّنَ الدَّهْرِ
لَمْ يَكُن شَيْئًا مَّذْكُورًا ﴿١﴾

We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him. Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight. (2)

إِنَّا خَلَقْنَا الْإِنسَانَ مِن نُّطْفَةٍ أَمْشَاجٍ
نَّبْتَلِيهِ فَجَعَلْنَاهُ سَمِيعًا بَصِيرًا ﴿٢﴾

We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful. (3)

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا
وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا ﴿٣﴾

For the unbelievers, we have prepared chains and shackles, and a blazing fire. (4)

إِنَّا أَعْتَدْنَا لِلْكَافِرِينَ سَلَاسِلَا
وَأَغْلَالًا وَسَعِيرًا ﴿٤﴾

The righteous shall drink from a cup mixed with *kāfūr*, (5)

إِنَّ الْأَبْرَارَ يَشْرَبُونَ مِن كَأْسٍ كَانَ
مِزَاجُهَا كَافُورًا ﴿٥﴾

a fountain where God's servants shall drink, making it flow in abundance. (6)

عَيْنًا يَشْرَبُ بِهَا عِبَادُ اللَّهِ يُفَجِّرُونَهَا
تَفْجِيرًا ﴿٦﴾

They are the ones who fulfil their vows and stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide, (7)

يُوفُونَ بِالنَّذْرِ وَيَخَافُونَ يَوْمًا كَانَ شَرُّهُ
مُسْتَطِيرًا ﴿٧﴾

who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive, (8)

وَيُطْعِمُونَ الطَّعَامَ عَلَىٰ حُبِّهِۦ مِسْكِينًا
وَيَتِيمًا وَأَسِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

[saying within themselves,] 'We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. (9)

إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ ٱللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنكُمْ جَزَآءً
وَلَا شُكُورًا ﴿٩﴾

We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.' (10)

إِنَّا نَخَافُ مِن رَّبِّنَا يَوْمًا عَبُوسًا قَمْطَرِيرًا ﴿١٠﴾

God will save them from the woes of that day, and will grant them radiance and joy, (11)

فَوَقَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ شَرَّ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْيَوْمِ وَلَقَّىٰهُمْ نَضْرَةً
وَسُرُورًا ﴿١١﴾

and will reward them for their patience in adversity with a garden and [garments of] silk. (12)

وَجَزَىٰهُم بِمَا صَبَرُوا۟ جَنَّةً وَحَرِيرًا ﴿١٢﴾

They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold. (13)

مُّتَّكِـِٔينَ فِيهَا عَلَى ٱلْأَرَآئِكِ ۖ لَا يَرَوْنَ فِيهَا
شَمْسًا وَلَا زَمْهَرِيرًا ﴿١٣﴾

Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach. (14)

وَدَانِيَةً عَلَيْهِمْ ظِلَـٰلُهَا وَذُلِّلَتْ قُطُوفُهَا
تَذْلِيلًا ﴿١٤﴾

They will be served with silver plates and goblets that seem to be crystal, (15)

وَيُطَافُ عَلَيْهِم بِـَٔانِيَةٍ مِّن فِضَّةٍ وَأَكْوَابٍ
كَانَتْ قَوَارِيرَا۠ ﴿١٥﴾

قَوَارِيرَا مِن فِضَّةٍ قَدَّرُوهَا تَقْدِيرًا ﴿١٦﴾

crystal-clear, but made of silver, the measure of which they are the ones to determine. (16)

وَيُسْقَوْنَ فِيهَا كَأْسًا كَانَ مِزَاجُهَا زَنجَبِيلًا ﴿١٧﴾

They will be given to drink of a cup flavoured with ginger, (17)

عَيْنًا فِيهَا تُسَمَّىٰ سَلْسَبِيلًا ﴿١٨﴾

from a spring there called *Salsabīl*. (18)

وَيَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَانٌ مُّخَلَّدُونَ إِذَا رَأَيْتَهُمْ حَسِبْتَهُمْ لُؤْلُؤًا مَّنثُورًا ﴿١٩﴾

They will be waited upon by immortal youths. If you see them, you would think they were scattered pearls. (19)

وَإِذَا رَأَيْتَ ثَمَّ رَأَيْتَ نَعِيمًا وَمُلْكًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٢٠﴾

If you were to look around, you would see only bliss and a vast kingdom. (20)

عَالِيَهُمْ ثِيَابُ سُندُسٍ خُضْرٌ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٌ ۖ وَحُلُّوا أَسَاوِرَ مِن فِضَّةٍ وَسَقَاهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ شَرَابًا طَهُورًا ﴿٢١﴾

They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and brocade; and adorned with bracelets of silver. And their Lord will give them a most pure drink. (21)

إِنَّ هَٰذَا كَانَ لَكُمْ جَزَاءً وَكَانَ سَعْيُكُم مَّشْكُورًا ﴿٢٢﴾

This is a reward for you. Your endeavours are well appreciated. (22)

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْقُرْآنَ تَنزِيلًا ﴿٢٣﴾

It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation. (23)

فَٱصۡبِرۡ لِحُكۡمِ رَبِّكَ وَلَا تُطِعۡ مِنۡهُمۡ
ءَاثِمًا أَوۡ كَفُورًا ﴿٢٤﴾

Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers. (24)

وَٱذۡكُرِ ٱسۡمَ رَبِّكَ بُكۡرَةً وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٢٥﴾

Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. (25)

وَمِنَ ٱلَّيۡلِ فَٱسۡجُدۡ لَهُۥ وَسَبِّحۡهُ
لَيۡلًا طَوِيلًا ﴿٢٦﴾

At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night. (26)

إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ يُحِبُّونَ ٱلۡعَاجِلَةَ وَيَذَرُونَ
وَرَآءَهُمۡ يَوۡمًا ثَقِيلًا ﴿٢٧﴾

These people love the fleeting life, and leave behind them a day that will be heavy. (27)

نَّحۡنُ خَلَقۡنَٰهُمۡ وَشَدَدۡنَآ أَسۡرَهُمۡ وَإِذَا
شِئۡنَا بَدَّلۡنَآ أَمۡثَٰلَهُمۡ تَبۡدِيلًا ﴿٢٨﴾

It is We who have created them and strengthened their constitution. If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind. (28)

إِنَّ هَٰذِهِۦ تَذۡكِرَةٌ فَمَن شَآءَ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَىٰ
رَبِّهِۦ سَبِيلًا ﴿٢٩﴾

This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord. (29)

وَمَا تَشَآءُونَ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٣٠﴾

Yet you cannot will except by the will of God. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. (30)

يُدۡخِلُ مَن يَشَآءُ فِي رَحۡمَتِهِۦۚ وَٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ
أَعَدَّ لَهُمۡ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿٣١﴾

He admits to His grace whoever He will, but for the wrongdoers He has prepared grievous suffering. (31)

When Man Was Nothing

> *Was there not a period of time when man was not yet something to be thought of? We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him. Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight. We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful.* (Verses 1–3)

This question with which the *sūrah* opens signifies a statement, but it is phrased in this way so that man should ask himself: 'Am I not aware that there was a period of time when I was nothing to be thought of?' This should lead to further questioning: should he not reflect on this fact? Should not such reflection guide him to how he was ushered in on life's stage where lights were focused on him to make of him a creature of note? The interrogative form in this instance facilitates some fine thoughts, encouraging us to reflect further.

One point of reflection takes us to the stage before man comes into existence. What was the universe like before man's advent? Man is so full of himself that he tends to forget that the universe was there long, long before he was. Perhaps the universe never expected that a new creature, man, would ever come into existence and certainly not until God willed it to so happen.

Another point takes us to the moment when human existence first began. Our imagination can paint different visions of that moment, known only to God, which added this new creature to the universe. Yet this was taken into account by God before it happened, with this new creature's role within the life of the universe well determined.

We should also reflect on how God's hand placed this new creature on life's stage, assigning a role to him and preparing him for it. Indeed, the same hand has linked his life to the life of the universe and provided the circumstances that ensure his survival and ability to fulfil his role easily. It monitors his progress, step by step.

Further reflections can be added, all coming from this short statement, culminating in the realization that the initiation, the life journey and the end are all determined according to an elaborate scheme.

Man's development and survival is also outlined in the *sūrah*: "*We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him.*

Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight." (Verse 2) The '*drop of mingled fluid*' perhaps refers to its formation when the man's sperm fertilizes the woman's egg. Alternatively, it may refer to the genes, or units of heredity, which distinguish the human species in the first place and transmit features from parent to offspring.

So, man is created from a drop of mingled fluid, neither by coincidence nor in idle play. He is created so that he can be tested. God certainly knows man, his test and the outcome of this test. What is meant here is that all this should come out on life's stage, producing its effects which cling to man so that he is requited in accordance with the outcome of his test. It is for this reason that God endowed man with the faculties of hearing and sight. He has been given these faculties of perception so that he can receive and respond, measure things and values, judging them and picking his choices. He will be rewarded in accordance with his choice.

In addition to knowledge and its acquisition, God gave man the ability to choose his way in life. He has shown him the way of guidance, i.e. the one that leads to Him, and left him to choose this way by himself or to stray from it, opting instead for one of the many other ways that do not lead to Him: "*We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful.*" (Verse 3) The verse refers to following divine guidance by being thankful, because the first thought that occurs to someone receiving guidance is to express gratitude for it. He is now aware that God has willed for him to be a creature of note after having being nothing to be thought of. God also granted him sight and hearing, as well as other faculties to be able to learn and acquire knowledge. He then provided him with guidance and left the choice to him. If such a person is a believer, then the first thought that occurs to him is to be thankful. If he does not give thanks, then he is certainly ungrateful.

With these three touches given at the opening of the *sūrah*, man realizes that there is a purpose behind his creation. He becomes aware that he is tied to a central point; that he is equipped with knowledge and is answerable for it; and that he is set a test and needs to pass it. In other words, his life on earth is a trial, not a period of idle play and neglect. These three short verses give him such a range to reflect upon. He acquires a very serious outlook on life and knows that the results of

the test will be announced once it is all over. Hence, how these verses change his vision in life and his feelings towards it and towards life values in general.

When the Test is Over

Now that the test has been put, and man has chosen one way or the other, what happens next? What awaits the unbelievers is briefly stated in one verse, because the general ambience of the *sūrah* is one of luxury, comfort and blessing. The torment prepared for the unbelievers is summed up: "*For the unbelievers, we have prepared chains and shackles, and a blazing fire.*" (Verse 4) They will have chains for their feet and shackles for their wrists, and then they will be cast into the blazing fire. The *sūrah* then quickly moves on to speak about the happiness of the other group:

> *The righteous shall drink from a cup mixed with* kāfūr, *a fountain where God's servants shall drink, making it flow in abundance.* (Verses 5–6)

This statement implies that the drink given to the righteous who are in heaven will be mixed with *kāfūr*, i.e. the calyx of sweet-smelling flowers, and that they will receive this drink in a cup filled from a fountain which flows in abundance. The Arabs used to mix their wine with *kāfūr*, or ginger, to give it a fine taste. Now, they know that their drink in heaven will be mixed with this and that it is plentiful. As for the nature of this drink, we understand that it is much finer and purer than any type of drink in this world, and that its enjoyment will be that much more enhanced. In our limited world, we cannot define the level or kind of enjoyment in the life to come. These are merely descriptions that give us an impression of what there is, because God knows that mankind cannot imagine what is beyond their world.

The *sūrah* calls the dwellers of heaven '*the righteous*' in the first verse, and describes them as '*God's servants*' in the second, honouring them first by acknowledging their moral standing and then referring to them as close to God. It then describes the qualities that earned them such a prize:

> *They are the ones who fulfil their vows and stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide, who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive, [saying within themselves,] 'We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.'* (Verses 7–10)

This is a bright picture of people with sincere hearts, sincere in their determination to fulfil the duties required by their faith, compassionate to those who are less fortunate, putting them ahead of themselves, keen to earn God's pleasure and wary of incurring what may earn His punishment. Thus, they are God-fearing and serious in approaching their duties.

Sincere and Generous

"*They are the ones who fulfil their vows.*" (Verse 7) They thus fulfil what they intend to do of acts of worship and the duties they commit themselves to perform, taking the question of faith very seriously. They neither shirk their duty nor evade their commitment. The Qur'ānic statement is wider in scope than the literal meaning of *nadhr*, the Arabic word used here meaning pledge, vow, etc. "*And stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide.*" (Verse 7) They realize what sort of day it will be. It is a day of woes and these woes can spread all over, affecting those who fall short of fulfilling their duties and those who are even worse, doing badly. Hence, they fear that some of these woes may apply to them. This fear is characteristic of people who are God-fearing, aware of the heavy duty placed on them, worried that they may not be up to its fulfilment however much they do of good deeds.

"*Who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive.*" (Verse 8) This statement describes their compassionate feelings, symbolized in their offering of food, which they need for themselves, to people who are less fortunate than themselves. In other words, they put such needy people, orphans and captives ahead of themselves, feeding them despite their own need of the food they give them. This picture suggests that the social environment that prevailed

in Makkah upon the advent of Islam was hard, lacking in compassion. Yet these Arabs paid generously when it was a question of competing for social standing. The righteous servants of God were like an oasis in this hard and barren desert: they gave food out of genuine compassion, sincerely dedicating their action to God: "*We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.*" (Verses 9–10) We see compassion overflowing from such hearts that seek God's pleasure, looking for no reward or praise from any creature. They do not hold up their favours in an attitude of conceit. They simply want to avoid the woes of a bleak and grim day, which they genuinely fear. The Prophet showed them the way to spare themselves its woes, as he said: "Save yourself from the fire by as little as half a date."[1]

Giving food to the needy in such a direct manner was at the time the proper expression of these people's own compassion and the most needed type of help. Ways and forms of charity may be completely different in other circumstances and social environments. What is important is the need to maintain such compassion towards others and the desire to do good only for God's sake, looking for no earthly recognition or reward.

Taxes may be regulated in society, and a portion of such taxes may be allocated for social security, ensuring that the poor are helped. However, this meets only one part of the Islamic objective that these verses refer to. Islam imposes the *zakāt* duty to fulfil this part of meeting the needs of the poor and the deprived. Islam, however, considers an equally important part of this objective, the feelings of those who give; in other words their desire to give elevates them to a high, noble standard. We must not belittle the importance of this objective. Yet some people seek to turn such high standards upside down, describing the Islamic system of *zakāt* and voluntary charity as ugly and claiming that it humiliates those

1. This *ḥadīth* urges kindness to the poor, making it clear that even a small act of kindness can be greatly rewarded. A person who has only one date and gives half of it to someone who is in dire need may have done enough to ensure his salvation on the Day of Judgement. Needless to say, a wealthy person needs to make his charity commensurate with his means. – Editor's note.

who take and corrupts those who give. Islam is a faith that sets a system to cultivate people's better feelings and sentiments. Kindly feelings and generosity refine those who are charitable and benefit the ones in need. They, thus, meet both aspects of the Islamic social objective. Hence, the Qur'ānic praise of this noble feeling.

> *God will save them from the woes of that day, and will grant them radiance and joy.* (Verse 11)

The *sūrah* mentions straightaway that they will be saved from whatever they feared on that day, thus reassuring them of their outcome while they are still in this life, believing in the Qur'ānic revelations they received. It also mentions that they will be blessed with radiant faces and joy in recompense for their hearty feelings towards others and their God-fearing attitude. The *sūrah* moves on to describe the comforts they will receive in heaven:

> *And will reward them for their patience in adversity with a garden and [garments of] silk. They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold. Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach.* (Verses 12–14)

They will thus have the garden of heaven to dwell in, and garments of silk to wear. "*They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold.*" (Verse 13) They are comfortable as they sit on these soft couches, in a pleasant atmosphere with no extreme temperatures. We should add here that this is a different world, one that has neither the sun we know, nor similar suns. "*Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach.*" (Verse 14) When shades come low and fruits are near, a feeling of ease and happiness spreads.

Such is the overall picture of heaven where God rewards His righteous servants who are given such a fine description of their status in this world. The *sūrah* adds more details of the luxuries they will have and the services provided for them:

They will be served with silver plates and goblets that seem to be crystal, crystal-clear, but made of silver, the measure of which they are the ones to determine. They will be given to drink of a cup flavoured with ginger, from a spring there called Salsabīl." (Verses 15–18)

As they sit on their soft couches in the pleasant shade, enjoying the fine atmosphere and delicious fruits, they find themselves served such pleasantries on silver plates and in silver goblets, yet these are as transparent as crystal, and so are unknown in this world. Moreover, these are of the right measure to give them maximum pleasure. Their drink is mixed with ginger, while it was previously mixed with *kāfūr*. These goblets are filled from a running spring called *Salsabīl*, a name implying a sweetly tasting drink.

To increase their enjoyment, those who bring them their plates and serve them their drinks are handsome youths whose young looks are permanent, unaffected by the passage of time, always looking like pearls: "*They will be waited upon by immortal youths. If you see them, you would think they were scattered pearls.*" (Verse 19) The *sūrah* then casts a general look at the scene and sums it up as well as its effect: "*If you were to look around, you would see only bliss and a vast kingdom.*" (Verse 20) That is how those servants of God, the righteous, live, in utter bliss and a vast kingdom. One aspect of all this bliss is highlighted, as though to justify this general description and further explain it: "*They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and brocade; and adorned with bracelets of silver. And their Lord will give them a most pure drink.*" (Verse 21) All these luxuries and all this bliss they receive directly from God, which adds greatly to its value. A more welcoming gesture is then added: "*This is a reward for you. Your endeavours are well appreciated.*" (Verse 22)

Thus the presentation ends, having given us an inspiring and detailed picture of the bliss and luxury enjoyed by the dwellers of heaven. All this is given in contrast with the chains, shackles and blazing fire the unbelievers suffer. We, thus, see the two widely different ends to the two widely divergent ways.

No Compromise

The *sūrah* now looks at the situation of the unbelievers who persist in their opposition to the divine faith. These did not understand the nature of what the Prophet advocated. Therefore, they tried to compromise with him, hoping that he would stop, or at least forgo the part of it that most offended them. The last section of the *sūrah* deals with this situation against the backdrop of their seeking a compromise with the Prophet, persecuting his followers, turning people away from God's message and rejecting the way of goodness that ensures reward in heaven:

> *It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation. Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers. Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night.* (Verses 23–26)

These four verses sum up an important principle of the Islamic faith, one which its advocates should fully understand and appreciate. They should study its effects within the human soul and in practical life.

God's Messenger faced the unbelievers directly, calling on them to believe in God's oneness. In advocating his message, the Prophet was not merely facing different beliefs. Had it been so, the case would have been much easier. The unbelievers' polytheistic beliefs were too flimsy and groundless to give them any solid ground to reject the clear, simple and logical Islamic faith. Instead, what led to their fierce and determined opposition, reported in history and recorded in the Qur'ān, was a host of circumstances and considerations. Social position as well as pride in prevailing values and what they might entail of material interest constituted the first factor motivating such people to hold tight to their flimsy and false beliefs, resisting those that were evidently true. Similarly, life under a system of *jāhiliyyah* allowed indulgence in every type of pleasure and gratification of every desire. Hence, people who were keen to indulge in these were expected to resist a faith that adopted a serious approach to morality and high values, stamping out all immoral and carnal practices. All these factors stood up against the Islamic message

when it was first advocated. They continue to stand up against it in every community and every generation. They represent the essential forces in the battle of faith, making it a hard-fought battle, requiring those fighting for faith to stand firm in the face of all such difficulties, willing to make great sacrifices. Therefore, advocates of Islam, regardless of place or time, must fully understand the truth summed up in these four verses and learn the circumstances leading to their revelations so that they apply to them too.

The Prophet received instructions from his Lord requiring him to warn his people. When he began carrying out his instructions, he was faced with those factors and circumstances that turned people away from his message and motivated them to persist with their own beliefs, knowing how flimsy and insupportable these were. They were very stubborn, and fought hard to preserve their beliefs, social order, personal interests and familiar practices and indulgences. They realized that the new faith threatened all these. Their defence of their system and old ways took several manifestations, starting with persecuting the few believers who responded to the new faith and trying to turn them back to the old way by force and physical torture. They also tried to give the new faith a bad image, making false accusations and spreading false rumours about it and the Messenger preaching it. They hoped that in this way they could prevent people from joining it. They thought that stopping people joining the new faith would be much easier than trying to turn them back from it after they had embraced and felt its truth.

At the same time, the unbelievers also tried different aspects of temptation, alongside the usual pressures and threats, to persuade the Prophet to meet them halfway. They wanted him to stop his onslaught against their beliefs, traditions and practices, and to work out some compromise, which would be acceptable to both parties. People normally try to work out a sort of *modus vivendi* when they have conflicting interests and claims. These same methods, or very similar ones, are often faced by the advocates of Islam.

It is true that, as a Messenger of God, the Prophet enjoyed God's protection and help, yet he was a human being facing difficult pressures and supported only by a small band of believers who were far weaker than their opponents. God was aware of all this. Therefore, He did not

abandon him, leaving him to face all this without support, or without marking the road ahead for him to follow. These four verses thus provide the essence of this much-needed support.

"*It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation.*" (Verse 23) This is the first point, stating where this message comes from and who has assigned the duty of its advocacy. It comes from God, having no source other than Him. It is the message the Qur'ān outlines. It cannot be mixed up with anything that does not come from its pure source. It will incorporate nothing that comes from anywhere other than its own source. It will borrow nothing alien to its nature. Moreover, God, who revealed the Qur'ān and entrusted the message to its advocate, will not abandon him or leave him to his own devices when it is He who gave him the Qur'ān.

Yet falsehood behaves with insolence, and evil blows its own trumpet. Hardship is inflicted on the believers and they are subjected to persecution. The enemies of the divine faith possess the means to turn people away from it, and they use different tactics to achieve their purpose. They appear adamant about maintaining their beliefs, preserving their traditions and following their erring and corrupt ways. Then, suddenly, they offer the opportunity for reconciliation and hold out the prospect of compromise. In such circumstances, such an offer is hard to resist.

Here comes the second point, stating a clear directive: "*Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers.*" (Verse 24) All matters are subject to God's will. He may allow evil and falsehood to have their day, and He may allow the believers' trial to last long. All this will be for a purpose that sees His will being done: "*Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience,*" until it comes at its appointed time. The instruction given to the Prophet requires him to persevere despite all the harm to which he may be exposed, and all the trials he may be put through. He is to remain patient even when he sees falsehood achieving victory, and evil taking airs. Moreover, he is to persevere in holding to the truth the Qur'ān lays down. He is not to listen to any offer of compromise or a meeting halfway if this is at the expense of the message he is advocating: "*Pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers.*" They do not offer anything good or beneficial.

How can they, when they are sinners and unbelievers? All that they offer you, when they try to compromise, is a share of sin and disbelief. They offer what they think will please and tempt you. They offered him what was indeed tempting: power, wealth and women. They were willing to make him their leader and to make him the richest among them. They also offered him pretty women. 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah said to him: "Abandon this matter you are advocating and I will give you my daughter as your wife. I have the prettiest daughters among the Quraysh." Those advocating falsehood always make such tempting offers to advocates of the truth, seeking to silence their message.

"*Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers.*" (Verse 24) There is no meeting point between you and them. No bridge can be built over the wide gulf separating your method from theirs, your truth from their falsehood, your light from their darkness, your faith from their disbelief, your message of truth from their *jāhiliyyah*.

The Prophet is told to remain patient, even though the adversity may be continuous, the trial hard, and the temptation powerful. Yet patience does not come easy. Help and support are always needed. Hence: "*Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night.*" (Verses 25–26) This, in a nutshell, is all the help and support that is needed: remembering God's name at the beginning and end of the day, prostrating before Him at night, and glorifying Him at length. The Prophet is told that these are the means to maintain the bond with God who gave him the Qur'ān and who entrusted him with His message. He is the source of all power. The way ahead is long, the burden he carries is heavy, and he needs much support. Now, the support is identified as maintaining contact with God by glorifying Him through the long night. Thus, the servant meets his Master alone, speaking to Him directly, looking up to Him for favour and support, feeling His compassion that removes all trouble and relieves exhaustion. His power will transform His servants' weaknesses and lack of numbers. When they shed their earthly burdens and look at the great task entrusted to them, they will think little of all the hardships they are going through and their resolve to get on with the task ahead will be that much strengthened.

God is ever merciful. He entrusted His servant, the Prophet, with His message and revealed the Qur'ān to him. He is aware of the hardship he would meet along his way. Therefore, He did not leave him without support. On the contrary, He gave him the support and help He knew to be most useful and effective along his difficult journey. This remains the support needed by all advocates of the divine message, regardless of time, circumstance or place. It is the same message, with the same circumstances, facing the same intransigent opposition by falsehood, and for the same reasons. Falsehood employs the same tools and means against it. Let, then, the means the truth employs be the ones God knows to be the most effective.

The truth advocates of the divine message should always bear in mind is the one God impressed on the first advocate of this message, the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). The duty to advocate the message is assigned by God, and it remains His message. The truth it outlines can never be mixed with the falsehood advocated by sinners and unbelievers. Hence, there can be no meeting point or reconciliation between the truth and falsehood. Nor can there be any halfway meeting between those advocating the truth and those advocating falsehood. They follow two ways that never meet. Should falsehood at times be very powerful and able to subdue the believers, who may be weak and small in number, it will be so because God, in His infinite wisdom, allows this. In such a situation, the only way is to remain patient and await God's judgement. In the meantime, support should be sought through night worship and glorification of Him. This is the only help that is guaranteed to work. This is an essential truth that must be fully understood by those who want to follow the Prophet's footsteps and tread along his way.

Divergent Ways

The *sūrah* continues to emphasize the fact that the Prophet's way has no meeting point with that of the unbelievers. They are so oblivious to what serves their own good, completely preoccupied with trivialities: "*These people love the fleeting life, and leave behind them a day that will be heavy.*" (Verse 27) Their concerns are petty, their goals insignificant, they are fully immersed in the fleeting life of this world, caring little

for the heavy day ahead. It is heavy with accountability and outcome. Such people cannot be heeded, and their way cannot be followed. They share no goal with the believers. Hence, no thought should be paid to their life, wealth, power and comfort. They all belong to this fleeting life and are, therefore, of little value. Their preference for this fleeting life indicates their inability to see what is good for them. This verse, then, continues with strengthening the Prophet and his followers as they faced the unbelievers' opposition. It also implies a warning for the unbelievers of the difficulty that lies ahead for them on the Day of Judgement.

The *sūrah* makes it clear that God, who created them and gave them all the power they enjoy, can easily replace them by others. However, in His infinite wisdom, He gives them time to reconsider:

> *It is We who have created them and strengthened their constitution. If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind.* (Verse 28)

This is a reminder to those unbelievers, who are proud of their strength, of the source of their power, and indeed the source of their very lives. It reassures the believers, few and weak as they were, that they actually advocate the message of the One who grants power to whom He will. It assures them that God's will operates according to His wisdom and to fulfil His purpose, until He makes His judgement. He is certainly the best of judges.

"*If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind.*" (Verse 28) They cannot use their power to defy God; it is He who has created them and given them their power. He is able to replace them with other people. If he gives them respite, this is an aspect of His grace that He bestows on His creatures. It is all His judgement and a manifestation of His wisdom.

Again, this verse aims to give the Prophet and the believers further strength, stating the respective positions of believers and unbelievers. It alerts the unbelievers who are so preoccupied with their love of this world and its pleasures, and who think too highly of their strength, that they must express their gratitude for God's favours and treat these as a test.

The *sūrah* alerts them further to the chance they still have as the Qur'ān, including the present *sūrah*, is recited to them: "*This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord.*" (Verse 29)

This is followed by re-emphasizing God's absolute will, to which everything refers. This is mentioned here so as to ensure that people submit to its judgement, and that they recognize it as the ultimate power: "*Yet you cannot will except by the will of God. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 30)

People should know that God Almighty is the One who decides and acts, and that He conducts the universe and holds sway over all things. They will then learn how to turn to Him and submit to His will. This is how such texts should be understood, recognizing at the same time that God has willed to give human beings the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood and to choose their way to either one or the other. They, thus, make their choice in accordance with God's will who knows the nature of human hearts and who has helped His servants by giving them knowledge, showing them the right way, sending messengers and revelation of the Qur'ān. Yet all this ends up determined by God's will. It is He who will guide a person to the right path through obedience and glorification of Him. When a person does not recognize God's controlling power and does not appeal to Him for help, then he has no guidance to what is good and will not glorify God.

Hence, "*He admits to His grace whoever He will, but for the wrongdoers He has prepared grievous suffering.*" (Verse 31) As we have repeatedly said, His will is free and absolute, taking whatever action He wishes. It is part of His will that His grace is granted to whoever He chooses. These are the ones who turn to Him, seeking His help and following His guidance. As for the wrongdoers, He gave them respite and granted them time, but they chose wrongly, so as to end in grievous suffering.

There is perfect harmony between the end and the beginning of the *sūrah*. The end gives an outline of the completion of the test to which man, whom God created from a drop of mingled fluid, is subjected. This after giving him guidance and allowing him to choose the way he wants to follow.